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Pakistan: Prospects for President Zia

President Zia ul-Haq is coping successfully with the current disturbances in Pakistan--the most serious threat to his rule so far. We believe his regime's capable handling of serious anti-government rioting in Sind Province coupled with the unwillingness of Pakistanis in other provinces to join the protest movement increase the chances that Zia and the Army will continue to guide Pakistan's political future for at least the next one to two years.

-- Zia's authoritarian regime has avoided overly repressive policies, though it has dealt firmly with organized demonstrations. It has given the country more than six years of domestic stability and substantial economic progress.

-- Zia also has dealt effectively with external threats. He has stood up to the Soviets on Afghanistan, while keeping channels open to a negotiated settlement; he has improved relations with India; and he has succeeded in gaining major economic aid and arms assistance from the United States.

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The President ultimately depends on the Army to remain in power.

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-- No ruler, however, can be certain of the Army's support if it is called upon to put down civil disorders, particularly in the all-important province of Punjab.

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Zia's main opposition, the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy (MRD), a coalition of eight opposition parties, is

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poorly organized and so far has lacked both a popular issue or an effective leader to galvanize a nationwide anti-Zia campaign. Reliable sources note that:

- The protest movement in Sind Province this summer was launched largely by the Pakistan People's Party of former Prime Minister Bhutto. The PPP has strong support in Sind, Bhutto's home province, and succeeded in rousing violent protests by playing on local grievances against the Punjabi-dominated government and Army.
- The PPP has substantial support among the urban and rural poor of Punjab, but has found it difficult to mobilize this support in the absence of a strong leader. Most of the PPP faithful look to Bhutto's daughter Benazir, but she has been kept under house arrest for the past two and one-half years.

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President Zia has promised to hold provincial and national elections by March 1985, amend the Constitution to create a strong presidential system, and withdraw martial law. His statements suggest he will bar hostile opposition parties--including the PPP--from participating in the elections. These parties and some influential interest groups believe they are losing ground under Zia and could coalesce against him.

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Given the right circumstances, we believe a nationwide opposition movement could arise rapidly and with little warning. In such an event, the Army probably would replace Zia with another general who would negotiate a return to civilian rule on terms the Army could accept.

- In our view, the Army would attempt to preserve the present US-Pakistan relationship, but if a Pakistan People's Party government succeeded in taking over, US-Pakistan ties, as well as Pakistan's stand on Afghanistan, probably would be significantly weakened.

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